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dedication

Dedicated to my dogs
of whom never gave up on me,
even after a bath

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Koipaw
the bold

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the uncertain

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the regretful

Lynxpaw
the inquisitive

Cherryspark
the swift

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the unforgiving

i

Ignorance is Bliss
word limit - 500
points earned - 8

[please take note that this chapter is incredibly short compared to other entries , and does not reflect my writing skills due to the word limit]

Ignorance is bliss...

It was a phrase Koipaw never truly understood. First told to her by the late Leader's mother, Carminestream, the words left her in question. Who would want to be ignorant? Wouldn't everyone want to know the wonders of life; the beauty of the word? The dappled apprentice had never known the true meaning of the phrase.

A melancholy cry awoke the she-cat from her pointless thoughts. "Sablefur, take Brushnose, Grizzyfang, Koipaw and Lynxpaw. Go to Redwood Forest." Heaving a sigh, the calico apprentice stood up. She harbored a resentment to the current deputy, Scrubshade. A paranoid and untrusting cat, she would constantly put every can in her clan in excess amounts of patrols, especially Koipaw. Muttering an incoherent curse, the apprentice joined her clanmates on the patrol.

"Are y'all ready to leave?" mewed Sablefur. Koipaw cringed at his foreign twang in his voice. It was no secret that the warrior was from a different land. "Where are we patrolling?" chirped a sandy coloured apprentice next to her. The calico apprentice bit down a sigh at him. She was no fan of her fellow apprentice, Lynxpaw, who made the elders seem competent. "Redwood Forest, ratbrain." Grizzyfang, Koipaw's mentor, snorted at the apprentice. Koipaw saw Sablefur suffering his paws, and turned to leave, the patrol soon

following on his heels.

~

The loud pitter-patter of the rain was deafening in the great forest. Fat, could droplets soaked through the fur of the patrol. The flame-coloured wood had turned deep mahogany in the harsh storm. Five pairs of paws trudged through the thick layer of wet mud. Every so often, a loud rumble of thunder cracked through the sky. Needs to say, the cats were wet, hungry and cold.

"Can't we go back? Lynxpaw complained to Brushnose "I'm cold and tired, and-"

Koipaw snarled, cutting the sandy apprentice off. "Do you think the enemy clans will stop in this weather?! We *need* to finish our patrol."

A sharp crack of lightning suddenly startled the group. The rain became even heavier, the thunder sounding louder than ever. "I think we should start heading back. No one should be out in this weather." Sablenose declared with a small shiver. The party leader's short fur let him be more prone to the cold than the rest of the cats. Nodding unanimously in agreement, the group turned to go back to camp when-

crack

A large bolt of lightning hit a tree five foxlegths from Lynxpaw, sparking a blaze in the tree. "Run!" cried Grizzlyfang as the tree's flames grew. Redwood trees were prone to flame, and Koipaw knew that if they were stuck in a fire, they'd surely die. Taking off with a sprint, the patrol, led by Sablefur, ran away from the growing blaze. The calico she-cat had trouble keeping up with the patrol. She knew that her stubby little legs would let her down.

As if on cue, the flames caught up with the cats, and surrounded them. The flames were not deterred by the heavy rain and seemed to burn even fiercer now that they had captured their prey. "Quick, up the tree!" Lynxpaw shouted as he started combing furiously up an untouched birch. Grizzlyfang climbed up in a hurry, followed by

Brushnose. They promptly jumped off the tree, over the flames, and started running away. Koipaw let out a yelp as the flames tickled her bushy tail. She swiftly scaled the tree with Sablefur right behind her. Right as both cats were on the branch, ready to jump off, a loud yowl rang in her ears. It was Lynxpaw.

Started, Sablefur fell off the branch and into the the fire's grasp. Koipaw tried to grab his paw, but it was useless. The flames had covered the warrior's fur, his unearthly wails filled the air. The apprentice wanted to jump away, to stop watching, but she couldn't. His face slowly charred, along with his body and tail. He gave Koipaw one final, desperate moan and then disappeared into the flames.

And as Koipaw escaped the flames and being the horrifying story to her gossip-hungry clan, she realized try what Carminestream meant. The scars of that night would stay with her until her inevitable death. The guilt would gnaw at her belly for seasons to come.

Ignorance is truly a bliss...

ii

Starry, Starry Night
word limit - 750
points earned - 9

The sapphire sky was speckled with tiny bright balls of light. A dew-glistened moor underneath reflected the majestic sight above. The long, stalk-like grass was only interrupted by a small pool of pure light. Three cats appeared, all from opposite sides of the moor, each having a polar opposite appearance from the rest. There was a large, square-jawed, black Maine Coon, his pelt full of burrs from his journey. There was a skinny, lean, reddish she-cat, her eyes greener than the grass below her paws. Lastly, there was a regal, furless cat with dainty paws, tiny ears, and worry etched over his face. The only thing these cats had in common were the stars in their fur.

"Azure-eyes, Batear, great to see you," the large cat greeted his friends. "Why did you call me here?" The three cats were gathered around the star-filled pond, all talking at each other.

"Tell me as well!" the she-cat, or as the squared-jaw cat called her, Azure-eyes, chimed in. "I was awoken from an amazing sleep! Y'all know that I don't interfere with living cat problems." The furless cat growled slightly at her proclamation.

"Azure-eyes, you were an amazing warrior. It's time you actually do something in StarClan, aside from sleeping and hunting," Batear turned his gaze to the other tom, "and you, Myrtletuft, you should know. Your legacy is both brains and brawn. Are you saying you are dumb enough not to work it out?" The cat flicked his tail at the pair, silently telling them not to argue.

And so all three sat around the pool, looking into its depths. "A danger is coming to the clans. As we've seen in one, an untameable fire ravaged its lands. They unfortunately lost Sablefur, Waspfury, and Beepaw in the flames." A large reflection of red fire appeared in the pool, startling Myrtletuft and Azure-eyes. "We must pick a savior from each clan, and that's why you two are here. We are having trouble finding the last cat." The she-cat snorted at Batear. It was obvious that she wanted to be anywhere else but here, alas, she did not move from her uncomfortable position. "You, Myrtletuft, see the best in cats, and you, Azure-eyes, see the worst. Together, you two will decide the final savior."

The pool assumed the reflection of a small, white she-cat with calico markings on her face, flanks, and tail. Myrtletuft gave a faint smile and announced her name. "Koipaw, apprentice to Grizzlyfang. Nine moons old with one littermate, Beepaw. She's calculating and battle-smart-" the pool changed to a viewing of her battle training. Koipaw was batting at a striped apprentice twice her size. No matter what the striped cat did, she was always one step ahead. "-courageous-" again, the pool changed reflections. A terrifying scene of her rescuing her mentor from a falling tree. "-hard working-" Koipaw gathering moss without complaining when the other apprentices were mucking around. "And, more importantly, she's a leader." Lastly, the pool reflected her in the aftermath of the fire. It showed her thick, dappled coat covered with ash as she led a group of the remaining apprentices and young warriors out of the territory to find prey. "I could go on for many moons. This she-cat has many traits that I admire."

Suddenly a sneer erupted from the starry she-cat. "You always find the best in cats, don't you?" Azure-eyes stood up and directed her fiery gaze into the water. "Dishonest-" the starry filed pool turned dark as a reflection of Koipaw could be seen and heard, lying about the prey she caught, "-ambitious-" the scene changed to one of the calicoes and a gaggle of young warriors plotting the future and what would happen if the higher ranks died, "-selfish, provocative-" now, it showed Koipaw unwilling to share a small mouse with her brother, then taunting him to fight her, which he did. "She's rude, she's unfaithful, she's-"

"Enough!" commanded Batear." Both of you seem to have very different views of this apprentice." Myrtletuft nodded at this statement, while Azure-eyes let out a loud snort. "I have come to the decision that she will be viewed closely by you two. The pair of you will watch over her until next time." The furless cat ignored the squawks of protest that came from both of them as he sat up and turned away. He took three short steps then looked back at them. "Remember, beware the jealous, for they are like animals." He then walked away, leaving the two in question.

iii

Shiver and Linger
word limit - 1000
points earned - 10

Muggy fog choked the cobalt sky, the moor seemed to fall into an eerie silence. Long stalks slowly swayed in the gentle zephyr, their methodical dance hypnotizing anyone who dared to watch. While the claw-moon could not provide sufficient light, small fireflies offered enough for the feline eye. If it wasn't for a group of cats, gathered in a small dip sheltered in the moor's hold, and the whimpers echoing throughout the meadow, the scene would almost look magical, something from an elder's tale. The sharp glint of the moonlight lit up a she-cat's eyes. Her sable-and-white tortoiseshell fur was flattened from the breeze. It was her to first speak.

"It's good that all of you made it on time. Cloverbloom, I assume you brought the captive?" Her rough voice rang in the gathered cat's ears. A lithe Bengal tom-cat stood forwards, in front of him was a shivering lump of striped fur. "I did, Puddlestalk. He was surprisingly easy to bring. A muted sob erupted from the prisoner. "Pathetic," a red marbled tabby spoke this time, her yellow eyes flashed with contempt. "truly pathetic. But why is he here?! We are cats living by the warrior code, not some mongrels or rogues. We live with honour." She turned her anger onto the tortoiseshell. Out of the four cats that had not spoken, two of them shuffled their paws, a passive reminder that they agreed with the tabby.

The bi-colour she-cat snorted at her words. Scanning the dusty earth in the dip, her blue slits spotted a crumpled dandelion only a few steps from her. Standing up, Puddestalk walked over to the flower with a regal bounce to her step and scooped up the

dandelion. "We are cats of the Warrior Code, yes, but it is up to us to rid the clans of poison. Don't you understand that? This precious flower is the exact shade of the flower that the poisoned clan is named after. And look at the sky! No cloud covers the moon. The sky does not object, they've even given us fog to hide under." Her voice was smooth this time, like honey. The marbled she-cat snorted, but the apprehension died out of her eyes. "If we have no more objections, let's hear what the prisoner has to say."

The Bengal tom but his beefy paw on the captive's neck and unsheathed his claws. "Speak! Tell us information." He commanded, the force of his voice plunging the prisoner into silence. "W-what do-do you w-want to know?" His eyes became slits as the claws of Cloverbloom pierced his neck. "A-ah yes, s-sorry. You want-t to know ab-bout the territory?" While his sentence was phrased as more of a question, no cat spoke to answer.

"B-bordering this territory is o-of course the White Oak Forest. O-of course you guys knew th-that, you found me there, but the forest is huge! White O-oaks dominate the forest with occasional spruce tr-trees. A-as you know, the on-only thing that separates you from the Oak Forest i-is the Cerulean Stream." The tabby looked at the blubbering cat with pity but did not say a word as he continued. "W-what you d-don't know about this stream is t-that it run-n deeper into the forest. Follow it and y-you'll reach the Water Hole! Yes, the Water Hole! I-its a large water source. Poison it and the Clan would have to rely on the stream for their drink-" He had said too much. The prisoner gasped at his words, surprised that it tumbled out of his mouth. Without saying a word, Puddlestalk flicked her paw, a gesture to go on. The cat's shoulders jumped in relief, as his mess-up was not questioned further.

"W-when you get t-to the water hole, you have two choices, l-left or r-right. Left will take you to a sm-small canopy of red-redwood trees. This is the o-only flame-proof part of the t-territory. Ever s-since The Great Fire, the Clan has t-taken refuge there, a-as their old camp burned down. U-under camp, there are tunnels that l-lead all over the territory." Satisfied that his prisoner was spewing vital information, Cloverbloom retracted his claws and smirked. "Tunnels. What's to the right?" The prisoner wept even more. As the

soft draft picked up to a stronger gust, his rambling became even more hysterical. "P-please d-don't kill me!" He pleaded with despair. "I-I'll tell you everything! To th-the right is the mountain range! W-we travel over it, and some tunnels l-lead to their as w-well. R-right in the middle o-of the range I-is a valley with w-water, h-herbs and loads of prey. T-thats where we get out h-herbs."

This statement raised Puddlestalk's eyebrow. "Anything else?"

"O-only one more thing! The t-tunnels! I'm not t-that mouse brained, I know you w-would of asked me about them. They lead everywhere! But t-they don't lead t-to one place. There is a-a massive gorge towards t-the edge of the territory. Looks l-like a giant claw. There is on-only one way to get d-down, but I was never told how! The Star-Filled Pool is in one of the caves of the gorge, b-but I don't know where!" He started screeching now, his nerves getting the better of him. "P-please don't kill me! I want to see my sister again! I want to go-" curved claws dug into his back, instantly quieting him.

"What's your name, son?" The tortoiseshell she-cat spoke with a motherly tone. The sudden change of tone surprised the gathered cats. "Beepaw..." the tom spluttered out. His words were hardly heard, as the wind had turned into a harsh gale. "Well, Beepaw, there's something that you must be aware of. Your Clan is choked by darkness, shadowy vines have trapped cats in their own minds. My cats have decided to choose you out of all cats to help us with our duty." Beepaw saw through her facade. He saw her manipulations, yet he also understood what she was saying.

"Beepaw, I need you to help me..."

iv

Rise of the Fall
word limit - unlimited
points earned - 8

Sickness was in the air. A sweet, suffocating, stench filled the musky air with is poisonous reek. The large redwood trees were shrouded in the morning's misty veils; their roots weaving in and out of the damp soil. The lazy sun threw is drenching waves onto the forest, making the fog dappled and bright. Remnants of charred grass and burned spruce sacking littered the ground with its waste. Circling the air was dozens of small, winged bugs, making their business hidden in the covers of the smog.

Heavy panting sliced through the silence. A large red, marbled tabby with lemon-yellow eyes limped through the piles of leaves, weeping with pain. Her frail body was slanted against a small, striped tom-cat. Both of them had numerous abrasions on their body, yet the tabby seemed more hurt. The syrupy smell of infection surrounded the pair, completely masking the metallic blood trail behind them. The lined tom-cat's shoulders slumped and his legs wobbled, then gave out. With a soft thud, the two cats tumbled into the spongy mud.

Winded, the red she-cat gasped in agony. Her collapse revealed two tender punctures in her flank, both oozing yellow pus. Tiny inflamed pockets on her skin surrounded the marks, they cherry blood bet heath them held a wildcat's greatest fear: infection. "Beepaw," she wheezed in agony "we need to get to the camp. How f-far away are we?" Her breathy voice was laced with desperation as she saw her companion fall to the ground with her. "I-I don't know. We a-are probably a d-days walk in o-our condition." A small moan

flared from the marbled she-cat. She had failed, she couldn't find the clan.

The pair sank into silence, the emotion of sorrow filled their hearts. Failure and grief sliced into them like a badger's claw. The molly slowly lowered her head into the dirt and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, son. Puddlestalk should have known that we weren't capable of passing the dangers." She sighed, her face contorting a look of pain. "Thanks for trying. You should have gotten your warrior name. I'm regretful that never happened." There was no noise, even the little annoying bugs had stopped making their quiet hum. Then, there was a small sob, then another. Everyone had different means of expressing misery, yet none of them ever affected the tabby, until now. A heartfelt emotion crept up her parched throat, urging her to do the same response in the desperate situation.

Was this situation so hopeless? A days walk in their condition, that's was the apprentice said. She let out a gasp and opened her eyes. This couldn't be the end, and she had to do something. She twitched her nose and inhaled the musky forest scents, along with others. Opening her dry mouth, the she-cat summoned every bit of energy she had left and yowled. The feline's voice rang throughout the trees, signaling their location. It was only a few minutes later when a group of five cats came into sight. Her plan had worked. "B-Beepaw?!" Exclaimed a young calico. Her cerulean eyes lit up with hope. "Koipaw!" whispered the striped apprentice. The resemblance was faint, yet clear. They were siblings, evident by their identical broad shoulders and medium length fur, as well as their unusually large paws. A slight smirk lit up the red she-cat's face. She had succeeded. Knowing all was well, she let the tendrils of darkness pull her into the void.

~

The cool night's air sent a gentle zephyr, making the trees sway in a dance. Stale rain from last night's storm still clung its residue to the earthy ground. The half moon's rats could not penetrate the camp's leafy roof, the redwood trees successfully keeping the dens good from the night light. "Koipaw!" Shouted Scrubstar. His commanding tone sent shivers down the calico's spine, making her fur stand up. It had been only a few short sunrises since the return of her brother,

and the newcomer. In-between feverish nightmares and restless nights, the pair had relayed their story to her and a few of the higher ranked cats. Beepaw, her only littermate, was driven into the river by the fire, and the she-cat had rescued him from drowning. After resting for nearly two moons, the tabby had nursed him back to health and they both headed to the Clan in an attempt to join. On the way, the pair encountered a sinkhole and fell down, severally injuring themselves. They managed to get out by climbing on a fallen tree but were found on the borders, too injured to move. If it wasn't for the red she-cat's loud voice, Koipaw would have been alone.

While the leader had fully believed the story, both Koipaw and Lynxpaw had their doubts. After Lynxpaw had become the Clan's newest medicine cat, the pair had surprisingly bonded and became more aware of the holes in the newcomer's story. It was too vague, and the vivid dreams of the rival clan and a hostage the apprentice had confirmed that Beepaw and his companion were lying. Even worse, Lynxpaw had confided in his tri-colour friend that his mentor had an omen after finding that the clan's main water source was poisoned.

The details were disturbing; the pool was split into three, one part was rough, tiny walks hitting the dirt shore, the next third was steaming, rolls of mist rising from the water's surface. The last part of the post disturbed her the most; the water was completely calm, yet a yew leaf floated on the water. That was the day Scrubstar became leader as the old one was poisoned from the pond.

"I'm coming." The apprentice meowed at the leader. She shot a wary glance at the sandy apprentice, who returned it with apprehension. Shoulders slumped with tiredness, Koipaw trudged through the camp and leaped clumsily onto a large mound of granite: the highledge. Standing on the white rock was a lean, mousy brown tom-cat with irregular fur patches and orange eyes. "Great of you to join me, Koipaw. If I am correct, you are awaiting your Warrior ceremony." The apprentice nodded frantically. Was it time that she'd finally become a Warrior?! "I have one more task for you before you earn your Warrior name. You are excellent at reading cats, and I know that you have a certain... affinity... for analyzing

cats and their personalities. I want, no, need you to tell me the newcomer's personality. We know almost nothing about her."

The temperature seemed to drop. A wave of frost hit Koipaw. It was no secret that the fluffy calico knew exactly how to read someone using their emotions and actions, but she never been asked to use this special gift. "O-okay, I'll try." She stammered in surprise. "We know almost nothing about her. She refuses to say her name. She's a good liar. Her story if flawed at best, but she does not waiver. It is my brother who gives that away. She's also quite smart. There's no way in StarClan that my brother came up with the idea to get out of that sinkhole. She also helped save her and Beepaw's life by effectively calculating the distance from our old camp and managing to correctly project her yowl to the passing patrol by smelling them."

Koipaw thought back to the day that she met the cat. The poor she-cat's body was riddled with infection and numerous unhealed wounds. According to Lynxpaw, it was a miracle that she had managed to push through and fight the infections as fast as she did. "She's also lying about her age. I believe she told you that she was what, fifteen moons? Judging by her recollection of past events and her general body and physique, she'd be closer to thirty. One last thing, when her and my littermate were recounting their story, Beepaw almost always twitched his nose at her comments, a sign that he knows that it's only a partial truth. Although, he did not do anything when she told us about the sinkholes. Many cats have also found small holes that were not present last moon." The multicolour calico took a final deep breath. "In conclusion, the tabby she-cat is smart, crafty, calculating, headstrong, unwavering and cunning. She would make a good Warrior, yet I cannot say if she is loyal. She is almost healthy again, despite the short amount of time passed."

A flash of disbelief passed in Scrubstar's eyes. It was clear that the slim leader had underestimated the apprentice. A small chuckle escaped the leader's lips as he smiled at Koipaw. "Good job. I suppose it is time to make you a Warrior." He turned his head to the dens and shouted for the clan to gather. Shaking the wariness off her pelt, the soon-to-be-Warrior hurdled down the highledge and hurried over to a group of current apprentices who had gathered.

Inclining her head to the cluster and touching noses with her sandy coloured medicine cat friend, Koipaw waited patiently for the ceremony to start.

"As you a know, Beepaw has returned with a she-cat companion. Although Beepaw has not completed his training, I ask his companion to join the Clan. Please come here. Koipaw, please ask come here." The marbled tabby slunk from the mouth of the medicine cat den and sat in front of the highledge. The mottled apprentice beamed with excitement, her muscles rippling with anticipation. "I, Scrubstar, leader of this clan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn. Do you two promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" The words were caught in Koipaw's throat. "I-I do." She stammered at the same time as the other she-cat.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Koipaw, from this moment you will be known as Koisplash. StarClan honours your courage and bravery, and we welcome you as a full warrior of this clan. Also, Beepaw's companion, from this moment you will be known as Cherryspark. StarClan honours your cunningness and creativity, and we welcome you as a full warrior of this clan."

Roars echoing the pair's name filled the redwood camp with clamor. Koipaw, no, Koisplash's sapphire eyes gleamed with joy. Her eyes gazed over her old apprentice friends, her striped littermate, and her old mentor and current deputy, Grizzlyfang. Caught in a moment of euphoria, the new Warrior almost didn't notice the slight rumble in the ground. All of a sudden, the cheering died instantly. Dozens of wary feline eyes scanned the camp unsure of what had happened. "Oh no. The pond." Koisplash heard Lynxpaw hiss in anxiety. After a few moments of calm, there was one more rumble, but unlike last time, the rumble was much stronger.

Thrown to the ground, the tri-colour calico let out a shrill yelp. The creaking of falling redwood and spruce trees deafened her, and the panicked yowls of her clanmates alarmed her senses. Startled cries of distant songbirds had put her into a trance. Loose parties and

rocks were thrown into the air, one particularly large granite stone was hurled into the Medicine Cat apprentice's head, making him instantly collapse. Snapping out of the daze, Koisplash forced her muscles to get up and go over to her wounded friend. "Run! Get to the mountains!" howled the Warrior's former mentor, Grizzlyfang. "Go to our mountain camp!" The thunderous vibrations of paws running filled the calico's sensitive ears with white noise. She sprinted to her sandy-pelted friend, narrowly missing a falling trunk. The splotched she-cat heard an ear splitting crunch, a yelp, and then a pause. Daring to look behind her, Koisplash saw the mangled body of an apprentice that she had befriended. Under an auburn trunk, the fallen cat lay at an unnatural angle, his face frozen with shock. Stifling a sob, the Warrior turned back around and grabbed her friend by the scruff, dashing to the only camp exit.

Once more, a giant roar came from the earth. It sounded like thousands of lions had synchronized an entire orchestra of howls. Koisplash, along with Lynxpaw, was yet again thrown to the mossy ground. Inky spots invaded the pair's vision, obstructing their sight. Two more crashes followed as two ancient redwood trees had simultaneously plummeted into the entrance of the camp, blocking any hope of exiting. A large weight gripped Koisplash's scruff, dragging her to a cave on the edge of the camp. The Medicine Cat den. Stupefied by the recent events, the broad-shouldered she-cat made no attempt to fight back. The Warrior was suddenly dropped in the inside of the den. Her eyes darted to the clearing, her eyes widening to slits in horror. Several large cracks had appeared in the ground, debris was everywhere, dens were in tatters, and trees littered the ground, pinning down the fragmented bodies of the unlucky.

As if the situation could not get any worse, a large scraping sound filled the den, and then a wide trunked tree fell in front of the cave, blocking nearly every ounce of light. Slowly removing from her daze, Koisplash's feline eyes adjusted to the abrupt darkness of the cave. She spotted the motionless body of Lynxpaw, along with her brother, Grizzlyfang, Cherryspark, a senior Warrior named Canarycry and a young queen named Honeydapple. "W-what happened?! Whats w-wrong with Lynx?!" The she-cat shouted in panic. Everything happened so fast, Koisplash's brain could not fully

process the fiasco in its entirety. Labored breaths came from the whole group. "It seems like the ground had shaken. It was like an earth... quake. Canarycry and I dragged you and your friend in here after he was knocked out. This is the only den that's survived the ordeal." Grizzlyfang spoke with a serious tone. "Lynxpaw will awake soon, but we have bigger problems on our paws." The Scottish For deputy didn't have to say what the problem was. All eyes hovered over the massive tree trunk in front of the entrance.

"We're trapped in our own camp."

V

Believer
word limit - 1500
points earned - 10

A calm darkness set over the granite cavern. The air was still and musky, the suffocating tranquility crowded the cave. Drops of pure light seeped from small cracks in the stone wall, and from little punctures in bark from a sturdy tree that covered the entrance. Small crevices crammed with foul-smelling leaves and saccharine berries dotted the far wall of the den. Stale prey and discarded bones were littered across the rigid floor, carelessly thrown into a pile of dead animals. The faint rumble of falling sediment rippled the peace of the cave, yet not completely breaking the thin sheet on silence. If it wasn't for the frantic scratches plastered into the burgundy wood, or the hushed group of battered cats sleeping in the darkest dip of the cave, the cavern would of get almost serene.

Lazily stirring awake, a large, grey, Scottish Fold with mahogany socks and an assortment of freckles on his face, opened his emerald eyes to the gloom. Inhaling the odorous scent of the cave, the muscular tom-cat smiled no danger. He got up slowly, and before long, the freckled cat spotted a thin, undersized tom, sitting uncomfortably on a piece of exposed slate beside the herb store. Forcing his tired paws to work, the broad feline padded towards the cat with no particular intention in mind. Faint echoes whispered throughout the granite den every time his aged paws hit the cool surface. Only a few strides away from the stunted tom, the folded-eared cat let out a small whisper.

"Lynxpaw, are you okay?" The small proclamation's noise bounced off the stone walls of the cave, echoing its soft message. Snapping

his head to stare at the Scottish Fold, Lynxpaw jumped to his paws in fright. As he calmed down after realizing that it was only his friend, the mahogany-socked cat noticed ribs sticking out from his frail chest, likely due to undernourishment. He also noticed other small details that hinted at his lack of nutrition. The apprentice's eyes were dull, not like their usual vibrant burned umber, and his pelt looked faded, far from the sun kissed sandy colour that it once held. "H-hi Grizzlyfang. I'm surprised you're awake. All the others have been asleep for a long time." The warrior smiled awkwardly back at the apprentice. When the group was first trapped in the medicine cat's den, Lynxpaw urged all of them to stay awake for as long as possible because of the effects sleeping in a trapped cave could have. Unfortunately, everyone but the sandy apprentice submitted to the darkness almost immediately.

"Grizzlyfang, can you help me?" Lynxpaw asked, his voice suddenly becoming uncertain. "I-I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm eating the old prey, just like you and the rest, but I-I seem to be growing thinner. I c-can't stop feeling tired, m-my fur is falling out, and-" the medicine cat apprentice froze. Both tom-cats stared at his paw, which was shaking slightly. Grizzlyfang's face turned into a frown, his green eyes narrowing to slits. "Grizzly, I don't know what's going on. W-what's wrong with me?" Clicking his tongue, the specked warrior lifted his paw to feel a tender part of the sandy-coloured tom-cat's neck. Suddenly, the muscular warrior sighed. "I know what you have because I have it too." The temperature seemed to drop. "When I was younger, the old medicine cat, Canarycry, discovered that the cats in the clan were getting affected by an unknown cause. He figured out that salt could help it - don't ask me how - but he was right. That's why we depend on the pond in the forest. It's full of salt."

It was easy for Lynxpaw to connect the dots. Ever since the pond had been poisoned, no cat would have gotten any salt from there, yet warriors who fled to the mountains didn't need the pond, and the stone there had lustrous veins of the white rock hidden in it. "W-what did you do? You're strong! I want to know how I can be fixed." The small tom's eyes were suddenly brighter; the prospect of a cure gave him hope. Shaking his head, Grizzyfang shot him a piteous stare. "Sorry, son, you can't fix it, but you can manage it.

Here, get comfortable, let me tell you a story."

—

The radiant sun shone high above the camp below. The day buzz of chattering cats filled the canopy of birch trees with bored mews. Sweet melodies from both songbirds and the wind set a lazy, blissful haze over the camp. Cats sat in groups of three or four, gossiping about the handsome young tabby from the bordering clan, how the deputy was getting older, and other chitchat topics that interested everyone. Well, everyone except one.

Lying down on the dewy grass inside of the apprentice den lay a chubby, folded-eared kitten with dull green eyes. His eyes followed the cats outside, but he did not dare to move. The greenleaf heat was too much for him to bear. Although he wasn't doing much physically, the young apprentice enjoyed eavesdropping into other cat's conversations and learning as much as he could. Did you know that Myrtletuft, the other clan's most feared (and handsome) warrior had died from a badger a few moons ago? The tom-cat now knew that thanks to a gaggle of she-cat apprentices. Shifting his body into a more comfortable position, he decided to eavesdrop on another cat's conversation that was a bit less sexist to tom-cats. Directing his one of hearing onto a group of senior warriors, the chubby cat starting hearing every word they were saying.

"Chervilpaw is a nightmare! Honestly, he's probably the laziest, unmotivated apprentice I've ever seen." proclaimed a raspy voice. The green-eyed kitten snorted to himself as the warrior kept on ranting about his brother. As the oldest cat in the clan, Azure-eyes could talk about anyone without repercussions. "Hey, Astercry, let's swap apprentices. At least yours has some potential under all of that fat." The apprentice's breath caught in his throat, his heart beating erratically and irregularly. They were talking about him now. "Ha! You think *my* apprentice has potential?! Maybe when he was a kit, but not anymore. He never eats yet always gains weight. I think he might be a *kittypet*." sneered Astercry. "He's always anxious, his muscles are weak, and he is more unfit than a nursing queen. Grizzlypaw is probably worse than Chervilpaw."

Grizzlypaw gasped. Was that really how his mentor thought of

him?! The walls of the den seemed to be coming in on him; his paws started to become soaked with sweat. His eyes suddenly connected with his brother's mentor, her eyes fur of pity. Embarrassed and angry, the Scottish Fold marched to the darkest part of the den, shoved his muzzle into his paws, and wished that he never had a mentor. Embracing the sweet darkness, the tom-cat thought back to what his mentor said. Was he as weak as Astercry said? For the past few moons, the kitten had been gaining weight and slowly growing weaker, but he hadn't paid attention to the fact that he was hefty. Ignoring the happy talking and laughter, Grizzlypaw tried to fall asleep, yet his insomnia wouldn't let him have the sweet release.

"Hun, are you there?" Again, the raspy mew of Azure-eyes filed his ears. "The medicine cat, Canarycry, wants to see you." Getting up on unsteady paws, the apprentice stormed past the warrior and walked into the medicine cat den. A wave of tangy odours hit him as he walking through the entrance of the den, his nose automatically scrunched up in distaste. Small holes and ledges stuffed with foul-smelling leaves and an assortment of covered the left wall of the den. Suddenly, a hairless tom-cat with beady yellow eyes pushed past the chubby apprentice. "Follow me." Canarycry shot at the chubby apprentice, then left the den. Astounded, Grizzlypaw hurried after the bald tom-cat out of camp.

After a few hours of silent walking, the pair had reached the far end of the territory, the Cerulean Stream. It was a fairly long trek for the tom-cat's stubby legs, but Grizzlypaw surprisingly kept up a good pace. As the two came over and closer to the sapphire body of water, the Scottish Fold noticed a sable-and-white tortoiseshell standing on the other side of the bank. Finally, as the two got to the edge of the river, Canarycry explained why they were here. "Kid, this is one of our bordering clan's warriors. She can help you with your... weight." A tinkle of laughter came from the tortoiseshell, her breathy, feminine voice sounding like honey. "Thank you for that introduction, Canarycry." She smiled at the medicine cat.

"Now, Grizzlypaw, your medicine cat has taken me to you because I can help with your condition. Starting tonight, you will come to me on the half-moon, and we shall start a journey into your

rehabilitation.

Before you ask, my name is Puddlestalk..."

vi

Black and Blue
word limit - 1500
points earned - 10

Thick, heavy fog lay below granite peak, spreading it's moisture around the rocky plateau and disabling long distance vision. Veins of impure salt swirled along the stone crags, creating an ethereal marbled effect on the mountains. A circle of towering cliffs surrounded a lush, V-shaped valley. An aquamarine waterfall sliced through the morning mist, it's frigid water spraying from a crack in the highest pike of the mountain cluster. Rough kobicha tree trunks with brittle, peridot leaves protruded from the thick clouds of smog, creating small clusters of lavish jade clouds. The clean mountain air was stagnant, allowing a cold frost to lay on the hard, rocky floor. Below the dense veil of clouds were dozens of cats gathered on either side of a powder-blue brook, snarls plastered on their faces.

"*AsterClan, attack*!" Yowled a dirty blond tom-cat with dull green eyes. A swarm of particularly lanky cats leaped over the stream, herding themselves into battle. The first few seconds were a complete frenzy, cats from both clans trying to pick off the easiest cat while subsequently being picked off by the strongest warriors. Every cat had jumped to the other side of the rushing water but one. The warrior was one of, if not the biggest cat in the battle. His shoulders and hind legs were packed with pure strength and muscle, his claws sharper than a badger tooth. With a freckled face and gleaming ultramarine eyes, this warrior was the perfect combatant. His fluffy face snapped back and forward, searching for his unknown factor, and finally, he found it.

In an almost cliché way, a clear path was open for a split second, revealing a beautiful chocolate-and-white tortoiseshell with elegant features and a regal expression. Bunching up power in his hind muscle, the warrior took three forceful bounds and sailed across the rushing rivulet in one formidable leap. The freckled warrior took advantage of the prompt path and ran to the she-cat, his eyes wide; his whiskers twitching with anticipation. As soon as the sapphire-eyed warrior reached the tortoiseshell, the path closed, trapping the pair in a circle of fighting cats. The two dipped their heads, acknowledging each other in a mute communication. Their eyes locked, his Egyptian blue orbs reflecting her forest green ones, passion igniting in both of their feline gazes.

"It's time, Grizzlyfang. I've trained you harder than I have with any of my clan's apprentices." Her tail kinked as she continued. "Our leaders fight a pointless battle, yet today is the day I shall finally see if you're ready to beat me." No further words were exchanged as the two dropped into a delicate crouch. The two had almost exact skill, yet Grizzlyfang had the strength to make up for the stamina he lacked against his opponent. They circled each other for a few moments until the bicolour she-cat leaped high in the air, aiming for the Scottish Fold's hairy back. In retaliation, the tom-cat easily rolled away and brought his paw across his rival's face, only just missing her eyes. Saccharine metallic blood sprung from the rake, splashing on the ground. This was only simple moves, the muscular warrior realized with a jolt. She was testing him, and he had succeeded. It was time for an actual battle. Again, the molly ran at Grizzlyfang with speed to match a swooping bird and contorted her body underneath his legs.

Badger Defence

The AsterClan tom-cat could almost hear his mentor whispering the perfect counterattack. The unorthodox move was one used on angry badgers, but would be perfect in this situation. Grizzlyfang waited until the dappled she-cat was only a whisker-length from him and then leaped over the tortoiseshell, turned on his back legs and bit her leg. Clumps of tepid, sticky blood spurted out from where the large tom-cat's yellowed fangs pierced his foe's thick skin. Shrieking in pain, the multicolour she-cat whipped her turn leg away from her

attacker. Beneath the pain flooding her Dartmouth-green eyes was pride and delight; her apprentice learned so well from her. Both stood only a fox-length from each other, surveying what to do next. "Thank you for teaching me, Puddlestalk." The folded-ear cat murmured. Then, he attacked.

Half-Turn Belly Rake

Again, his mentor's voice sounded in his head. Grizzlyfang remembered the countless training sessions to help perfect this move and the sleepless nights of practicing. The Scottish Fold took two mighty bounds and darted underneath the dappled enemy, slicing his claws up her belly. As he went to commence the final stage of the move, Puddlestalk swiftly jumped away, throwing the muscular warrior off balance. While the tom-cat was temporarily stunned, the long-limbed she-cat flicked her hind legs in the air as she spun on her forepaws, as quick as lightning, she suddenly raked her needle-like claws at Grizzlyfang's larynx, then tucked into an armadillo ball, rolling towards the spotted tom-cat and throwing him to the ground. A sharp, stabbing pain in the fuzzy feline's throat made him shriek in pain as he tasted his own syrupy blood. A final, well-aimed kick to the tom's chest sent him crashing down the marshy banks of the river and plunging into the icy water.

A wave of arctic water hit Grizzlyfang as his head submerged into the depths. His breath was knocked from his chest as the tri-colour tom-cat searched for precious air. He waited until his soaked legs hit the pebble-covered bottom then with a large, powerful kick, pushed himself to the surface. The warrior submerged, hacking the wintry liquid out of his injured windpipe. He stumbled onto the shallow shore but was momentarily blinded by another wave of frosty water covering his eyes. Through the blurriness that obscured his sharp feline vision, Grizzlyfang could see two tortoiseshell paws immersed in the water, tiny droplets flying away from the disturbed surface. Before the Scottish Fold could retaliate, Puddlestalk swept her leg from underneath him, making his sturdy forelegs buckle and once again, submerging him. A surge of panic overtook the AsterClan warrior again as the realization that he was going to lose this precious battle.

Underwater Push-Off

Grizzlyfang gasped underwater, letting air escape in bubbles from his mouth. The move wasn't generally used by his Clan, but it was a last resort for water-fighting. He had one chance to get this right before his bi-colour opponent figured out what was happening. He channeled all of his remaining power to his hind-legs and swiftly jumped up from the brook's depths and onto Puddlestalk's shoulders. The two tumbled from the stream and back onto the springy grassland of the valley before the tom-cat let go of the calico cat. Both stood up on shaky legs, again only a fox-length apart. Cold steam arose from the pair's black lips, the cold finally getting to their systems. The fight had to end. Now.

Puddlestalk reared up on her lean hind-legs and pushed down on her foe's shoulders. A powerful move, the Upright Lock, yet Grizzlyfang managed to push her off his tender bone and expose the molly's sensitive belly. Thinking rashly, the sapphire-eyed tom-cat dragged his claws into her soft flesh in her belly. He was only halfway down her stomach when Puddlestalk ducked and rolled away from his infliction. Her forest green eyes gleamed with excitement. She ran at him, jumping onto bruised back and kicking his forepaws, allowing the warrior to crash down onto the dirt. Anger bubbled up inside Grizzyfang as he realized that yet again, his unofficial mentor had bested him by attacking his legs and paws. Heaving with anguish, the large, fluffy cat rolled onto his back, flinging his attacker off. The two were too evenly matched; they could not beat each other using normal Clan fighting techniques. Suddenly, he had an idea.

The two continued to battle with petty apprentice blows to the face. Grizzyfang used his advantage in strength to slowly push his mentor towards the icy river. The brown-and-white tortoiseshell had managed to get a few nasty claw marks along her opponent's forehead and chest, while the tri-colour enemy warrior had inflicted a large mark across her neck. For a few more minutes, they fought, until both were belly-deep in the clear ultramarine water. Flicking his tail faster than a rabbit, Grizzlyfang flung water into Puddlestalk's eyes, just as she did to him. The she-cat yelped in surprise, allowing him to have a split-second window of attack. Rushing forward with all remaining energy he had left; the stippled warrior did the only move he could think of.

The Underwater Clinch

Using his unusually powerful muscles, the bulky combatant thrust the angular warrior into the bitter frost of the water. Allowing her to struggle for a few seconds, Grizzlyfang yanked her above the water and then dunked her back under the disturbed surface. This painful cycle happened only twice more before Puddlestalk lost energy, her legs buckling from under her. One final time, Grizzlyfang pulled her up again and threw her to the shore, standing on top of her with his soaked chest puffed out. "You won, kid. It's time you become like me..." the defeated warrior wheezed out in pain.

"...a warrior of darkness."

vii

Tremors of the Dead
word limit - 2000
points earned - 10

Specks of unfiltered light shone through the murky darkness, lighting up the great redwood field. Swirls of humidity formed, creating ethereal clouds flecked with pure brightness. Egyptian green tendrils of vines climbed the ginormous umber bark, vying for the first glance at the leaf-bare sun. Morning dew clung to every crevice, it's liquid fresh smell filling the clearing surrounding it. Century-old giants rose from the earth with roots weaving in and out of the damp soil, their leaves glowing emerald as rays of light struck through the fragile structure. Any sound that might have been heard was quickly swallowed by the growing masses of dewy gas in the atmosphere as it slowly glided through the musky red trees of the forest. Flattened grass and upturned slush covered the bed of dirt, the ground ruined by an obvious disturbance.

Heavy panting suddenly sliced through the serene muteness of the forest, accompanied with frantic, irregular paw-steps and the occasional impactful thud. A frenzied she-cat ran through the odourless formations of vaporous clouds, unable to stop her paws from flailing in a desperate run. Her dainty paws caught on the morning dew, throwing her forwards and headfirst into a cluster of gnarled roots. The cat let out a feminine yowl and she collapsed at the pain of the impact, yet she quickly shot up and continued her hysteric dash across the grove of redwood trees. Her back claws tore up copious amounts of dirt, leading an apparent trail, yet her mind was focused on seemingly other, more important things. Dashing away from the crash site, the she-cat sprinted outside of the thick, lush trees and into an expansive moor.

Facing into the rising sun, the cat ran through the fairy even-grounded moor, long stalks constantly whipping her face and flank. Her chest was rising and falling fast, and her breaths were irregular, yet she continued to frightfully dart from the dark woods. Gradually, another strike of pawsteps hitting the field's compact earth filled the molly's ears, followed by another pair, and then another. Three cats were pursuing the breathless she-cat, and evident by their fierce snarls, they weren't intending her to get away. As the frantic feline began to slow out of tiredness, her pursuers galloped even faster, tearing down any measly stalk standing in their way. Sweat slid down the she-cat's legs, making her running awkward and uncomfortable. Without warning, the ground dropped a few foxlengths and rose again, making the escaping she-cat stumble over her paws, letting her hunters get dangerously close to her position.

The she-cat had only a moment to make an impossible decision: let her chasers catch her, or somehow find a way to hide. There was no point in letting them catch her, as she was almost sure they'd kill her in the most gruesome way possible. There was only one option in her mind, hide. Swiftly taking a sharp turn to the south and using her last drop of energy to pick up her speed, the she-cat ran into even denser clusters of long wheat stalks. Particles of fallen beds attached to her medium-length fur, masking her scent. She could feel the vibrations of powerful paws hitting the ground. As soon as she felt that she had gathered enough distance, the cat slid on the dusty floor, gliding into a small ditch in the moor. Crashing into a group of small, yellow flowers rather ungracefully, she hid under the small florae, trying to conceal her position.

Rustling in the yellow shoots surrounding the dip filled the feline's sensitive ears yet she continued to hide in fear of her life. Fear gnawed at the she-cat's belly as the swishing of stalks got closer and closer to her desperate hiding spot. The cat inhaled a sharp breath as the sound of moving parts stopped for a moment. "She cannot hide forever. We will take her out when the sun goes down." bellowed a powerful voice, only a foxlength from her shrouding hollow. Slowly, the sound of pawsteps dissipated into painful

silence. Taking a long exhale, the cat stood up in relief. After the perilous chase and near-death experiences, the she-cat looked surprisingly calm and collected. Shaking her pelt to rid the small particles of dust and wheat, she looked around the small dip, thankful that her prediction on where it was had been right.

Now that the lazy sun had fully risen above the rigid horizon, the she-cat's appearance was revealed. She was a lean, lithe chocolate-and-white tortoiseshell with vibrant emerald eyes. Her pelt was riddled with freshly healed wounds and clots of dry crimson blood. Black and purple bags hung beneath her sunken eyes; her paw-pads raw and peeling. Clicking her tongue, the dappled she-cat glanced at the gold and lemon flowers that had in a way, saved her life, and started laughing softly. How ironic was it, that the flowers that had saved her were Asters, the flowers in which gave darkness its name? The darkness... it was suffocating, even in the broad daylight. The tendrils of pure black had crawled into the tortoiseshell's mind, wrapping its slimy grips around her mind until she was obedient, monotonous, completely submissive to the malevolent scums that she used to call friends.

Why had she joined them again? The promise of greatness, of power, was overpowering, she *knew* their intentions, yet they preached StarClan like a preacher, full of ecstasy and fire. The darkness was mortal, made from living organisms and ideas, with no prompt from the dead and fermenting evil. It was not the greatness that attracted her, but the idea of training under the great warriors of both clans. The peridot-eyed she-cat laughed again, but this time, her chuckle was filled with bitter sorrow and resentment. She had been fooled. The great warrior had been fooled. They'd all been fooled! She was one of the lucky ones, she had realised what their true intentions were before they properly tainted her heart and soul. A sinking feeling of guilt strikes her gut as she realised that her craftiness and foolishness had gathered her favourite apprentice into the dark.

A pained, feminine scream woke up the chocolate-and-white tortoiseshell she-cat from her crazed thoughts. The thunderous yowl echoed throughout the floret-rich moor, waves of sound bouncing off the rough surfaces and into the cat's ears. Momentarily

forgetting the pursuit that took place only moments ago, the lean she-cat hurried out of the hole, racing towards the screech. It took her a while to pinpoint the exact location, but eventually, she localised the shriek to be near the river border of her Clan and the neighbouring. Carefully walking to the rushing water, the multicoloured feline searched the area for any sign of life or dangers. Concluding that there were no visible signs, she sharply inhaled, taking in the rich smells of the moor, and the saccharine doors of fresh blood.

As the sepia molly crept closer and closer to the river, the stench of syrupy fluid grew stronger and stronger. The lithe cat flattened her ears, dread and anxiety flooding her emotions; the hard ground of the moor progressively turned into the marsh with every silent step she took. She started to doubt her impulsive decision to investigate the high-pitched yowl as thoughts of baiting her out swum in her mind. Creeping out of the grassland's chartreuse green stalks, the spotted tortoiseshell lay her eyes on horror. Bitter bile shot through her throat as she retched, spluttering yellowish spew into the vegetation. Streaks of saliva continued to leak from her mouth. The scene was too disturbing, too upsetting for the she-cat to handle.

Besides the turquoise brook was a fallen cat, lying at an unnatural angle. The once-clean, calico-and-white fur was damp and blanketed with layers of filth and thick, currant-coloured liquid. Both hind-legs were twisted in an abnormal direction, with fractured bones protruding from thin, blush skin. The graphite eyes of the deceased had been severely injured and both irises were torn, oozing out their onyx black insides. A jagged gash on the soft, fragile belly seeped fetid yellowish pus along with clotted blood and dead tissue. Covering the genital of the massacred cat was a long twine of skinny, blush tubes, accompanied with fatter ducts, both ejaculating foul puce waste. The most horrific damage to the lifeless calico was perhaps the large, wood branch impaled through the jugular, and exiting out through the back of the poor cat's neck.

Who would do such a thing to a cat, to mutilate someone to this point of disfigurement? Through it took some time, the tortoiseshell identified the victim as a queen from the other clan who had recently given birth to two cats. *Poor thing*. The mottled feline

grimaced as she realised that the kits, at only a moon old, must face the death of their caregiver. Suddenly, a thought struck the she-cat like lightning, the revelation sending shocks down her spine. Blood was sweet, yet metallic, wasn't it? Taking another deep breathing in, the nimble cat let the surrounding scents waft into her nose. The brassy stench of crimson water could not be smelled, yet the tang of something unidentified overpowered it, something... *floral*.

The speckled cat brought a paw to her face. This was all related, and she was a mousebrain for not realising sooner. The darkness, they were sending a warning. No cat in their right mind would kill a queen, but these cats? This was a thinly veiled threat against her life, and the she-cat knew it. The _monsters_ that had killed the nursing calico managed to replicate *every single* murder the tortoiseshell had committed in the name of sin. Her first, a slight push off of a nearby cliff, committed against a massive charcoal Maine Coon with a jaw squarer than a two-leg house, his irises rupturing after the impact; her second, a deliberate fight with a badger resulting in the neighbouring Clan's deputy's death, he died with a large wound to his soft stomach while watching his own entrails slip out feebly; her third and final, an 'accidental' fall from the tallest branch of the tallest tree, the victim, a marmalade orange tabby had been impaled on the very branch on which she fell off of.

The floral fragrance was almost palpable, it's overpowering scent made the emerald-eyed feline's head spin. Perhaps the shock and distress had finally seeped its way into the she-cat's mind, yet a foolish plan started formulating in her thoughts. With the lack of intestines in the body, there could be a plausible chance that the perfumed aroma came from whatever was inside the dead cat.

Taking a shaky step towards the calico queen, she bent down towards the incision on the lifeless abdomen, drawing her hickory paw on the wound and after a long moment, opening the out-covered slice.

Immediately, another rough of bile raced through the she-cat's throat. Hurrying to the stream, she quickly emptied whatever remains of food she had into the azure water. Asters. Asters! The dreaded yellow flowers. Dozens of them were carefully stuffed inside of the queen's belly. The shadows in which the feline once

fought for had turned on her, threatening her with pathetic Asters. The tortoiseshell finished retching her stomach acid into the water, dark thoughts suddenly crowding her mind. She couldn't let another cat suffer the same collateral damage as the dead queen beside her. The darkness *needed* to be stopped. It would be easy to convince her own clan, but what about the other? The skinny chocolate-and-white cat looked across the river, her vibrant shamrock-green eyes igniting with emotion. She needed to do something, soon, before the gloom swallowed all the clans whole.

They all *had* to die. None of them could be spared. She would call a meeting, and discuss how to kill them all. Chuckling slightly, the she-cat unsheathed her long claws.

"My beloved, I am coming for you. Not even your chubby cheeks and child-like eyes can stop me..."

viii

Ethereally Delusion
word limit - 2000
points earned - 8

Darkness. Pure darkness. Inky black surrounded the cave, invading every crevice; blanketing the granite walls. Liquorice colours swirled in the musky cavern, their pitch hues obscuring all sight. No visible light was present, neither sun nor moon could mould its rays to fit in the compact cave. The dank air was motionless, it's ambrosial fragrance wafting throughout the stone walls. Muteness of onyx darkness was almost deafening. After a few long moments, loud thumping filled the silence, the methodical pumping filled the void of calm. Like blood pumping in excited veins, the beat became faster and faster, growing louder with each passing second. Materialising out of the darkness, swirls of flames grew from the dusty ground, each tendril of fire latching onto each other. The embers grew, forming the shape of an inferno tiger, with each detail and stripe covered with specks of fiery light. Snarling, the blazing tiger spat out ashes and opened his scorching wide jaws. Without warning, it lunged, it's fire ready to devour the cave whole...

Koisplash woke up in cold sweat. Her sleek calico fur was drenched in bodily fluids; her vibrant sapphire eyes wide with shock. Scrambling onto her dainty paws, the tri-colour she-cat whipped her head back and forward, searching for the phantom beast in her dreams. The nightmare, it was too realistic, the young warrior could almost feel the burning inferno prickle at her skin. Panting heavily, the she-cat sat down and drew her paw over her white ears in an attempt to calm her raging nerves. It took a few minutes for the feminine cat to compose herself, to soothe her erratic heart and pulse. Flecks of light seeped in the den, creating an ethereal misty

effect in the cave's atmosphere. Why was this dream affecting her so much? Something about it felt dangerous, almost forewarning. Standing up again to shake her pelt from the night's perspiration, Koisplash felt a wave of nausea crash down, dropping a huge force onto her forehead. The granite cavern felt off, like something was missing.

Egyptian blue eyes widening, a small gasp escaped the she-cat's throat. The stone cave in which she and her clanmates were trapped in was empty. The hollow was devoid of life, mammal and organic. All crevices had been cleaned, the saccharine berries and foul herbs were absent from their shelves. The small mound of stale prey that once lay behind her nest was swept clean, with an exception of the used chalky bones. At the blocked entrance, the ginormous fallen redwood tree had disappeared, replaced with a slate boulder. Koisplash's dappled fur stood on end, her flint claws unsheathed. What had happened?! Where were her companions and friends? The lithe calico took a shaky step towards the scattered bones, hoping that perhaps of them could give any clues to what took place when she was in her restless slumber. Stalking near the mound of alabaster remains, the trapped feline could only just make out a shape of the bones in the dim light.

Right as the she-cat got remote close to the pile, the porcelain bones began to shudder and move, forming a circular shape of the cave's basalt floor. Koisplash jumped, hissing in surprise. Confusion spread like wildfire in her mind as she stared at the cavern's mysterious prey remains. The circle was too perfect; each bone spread evenly apart. The possibility of the inanimate objects moving to such shape without help stunned the multicolour warrior. Curiosity bubbled at the young cat's belly as she sluggishly inched towards the ring, her interest getting the better of her judgement. Inwardly, Koisplash tried to stop her white paws from edging towards the formation, yet somehow, she was compelled to shuffle forwards. As the marmalade, black, and white feline was only a whisker from the circle of bones, her legs grew unstable, and she was sent flying right through the centre of the ring, and straight through the basalt cave-floor.

The wind rushed at the warrior's chiffon face as she plummeted through the charcoal darkness. For what seemed like forever, Koisplash descended through the midnight oblivion, falling paws-first into the abyss of darkness. Soggy, bitter air pierced the tumbling warrior's skin like thousands of little rose thorns. Gravity seemed to catch up with the she-cat as her limber body slammed into the ground, a large 'thud' echoing throughout the pitch-black gloom. The mottled feline lay on the hickory ground, her hindlegs sprawled out beneath her while her forelegs were tucked safely in her chocolate-coloured chest. Loud sirens rung in her ears; the impact of the fall taking its toll on her bodily functions. For many prolonged, painful moments, the young warrior faded in and out of consciousness, inky clouds drifting across her vision. Koisplash could only moan slightly as the agony from the collision blurred the she-cat's control over her broken body. Seconds trickled by like water in a light drizzle, the ache dulling as the molly lay on the floor.

Gently, function returned to Koisplash, her mind leisurely gaining control over her lean limbs and limber body. Time was no construct in whatever place the calico-and-white she-cat had ended up in. Minutes seemed to travel slower than hours, yet hours were faster than seconds. The onyx clouds obstructing the warrior's vision dissipated as she finally realised that she had control over all her senses. Muscles tender and throbbing with pain, the AsterClan molly uncomfortably sat up and skimmed her surroundings, searching for any kind of physical danger. Everywhere around her were dusky cedar trees, shrivelled, wilted grass and an eerie, constant could of ethereal mist that appeared to glow ever so faintly. The nutrient-poor dirt around her was covered in a slick, shiny lacquer, giving the dying shrubs a glossy outline. Koisplash's brain was too numb to comprehend the events that had just taken place. The incidents seemed realistic, yet dream-like in a sort of fashion. Unable to process any emotion aside from shock, the multicoloured feline decided to scout out the unearthly biome that she was stuck in.

Each step taken sent jolts of electric torture through Koispash's bones. Humidity clung to the tri-coloured feline's short fur, weighing down each trudge with extra bulk. A knowing sense of

fear scraped at her stomach, allowing dread and bile to crawl up the she-cat's ivory throat. She had only taken a tree-lengths worth of walking when an odorous gas filled the air, wafting into her pink nose. Noxious smoke filled the air, weaving in and out of the unkempt shrubbery. Smoky tendrils of ash wrapped around thick, kobicha trees, drenching them in soot and dust. Bronze and apricot fire blazed through the dry grass, obscuring and puny organic life in its way. Fiery rage crackled through the air, fuelling destruction and chaos. Charred roots crumbled left and right, their once-vital strength giving up and letting their precious trunks fall to the ground. Vibrant, yellow and black bees desperately flew from their feeble nests, their hopeless attempts to rescue the young obstructed by the flames. Clusters of ignited flora crying to the sky could be heard, their desperate plea for life. As the embers and blazes ignited every cedar tree, one by one, it was clear that such a disaster could not be stopped.

Where had the fire come from?! The question replayed in the feline's mind as the flames burned behind her. Koisplash begged her agile legs to run, yet they felt like boulders, and could not be moved. The inferno swiftly caught up and surround the calico warrior, their scorching growing larger as they approached her. Frantically looking around her, the she-cat saw no escape from the fast-growing lethal firestorm. Out of her peripheral vision, she spotted a cloud-shaped teal pond directly behind her position. The young she-cat's brows furrowed together; she had never seen the ocean-blue pool before. How was it possible that is just... appeared? An idea of sheltering within the pond's watery depths crossed Koisplash's mind, yet the plan's foolishness and improbability made her masked eyes cringe. The blazes burned ever more fiercely now as they channelled rage into blistering heat; the moistness of the multi-hued she-cat's mouth evaporated instantly. Before the trapped wildcat had any chance to preach her last words, a humungous mammal formed from outside the fire and gracefully sprung into the flames, over the she-cat's head and into the translucent teal pond, both disappearing into the scorched ground.

A clear path from the surrounding flames emerged, allowing for a safe getaway. Taking her chances, Koisplash sprinted through the opening, her legs now feeling lighter than a butterfly. The juvenile

clan-cat gasped as her lanky legs carried her away using some unknown newfound energy. Flames and embers seemed to stay behind her as the dappled calico she-cat felt her internal body temperature cool the further she hurried away. Swirls of foggy clouds became denser as she raced beyond the fiery destruction, to the point where she could not see farther than her own cream whiskers. Stopping her frantic escape, Koisplash stood amid the fog, searching for a clear direction. The haze was tinged crimson, and it's perfumed odour reeked of blossoms and citrus. An airy, spectral hum glided through the thick mist, constructing a spiritly hymn. Spooked, the tri-colour clan-cat hissed slightly as her fur stood upright along her spine. A foreshadowing impression compelled the agile molly to frown.

Koisplash widened her blue-slate eyes as reflections appeared in the opaque scarlet fog, the structural imprints of felines circled the warrior like prey. Cats of radiant, transparent colours swarmed as a pack, each soul indistinguishable. Through the vapour and mobs familiar pelt caught the divided attention of the marmalade, black and white she-cat. With fur as black as oil, and eyes greener than an oak tree's leaves, a pang of horror struck the young molly like lightning. Heaving hard, laboured breaths, Koisplash tried to back away from the etherous tom-cat. The spirit walled towards her, revealing savage, unhealed burn wounds plastered throughout half his body. Rank, Dijon-yellow pus seeped through cheery-rose abrasions, the stench of burning flesh invaded the surrounding air. All other phantoms faded back to the tangy citrus fog, forcing the speckled feline to stare at the horrible wounds. Thick, bubbling blood plastered the tom-cat's whole side of his body; his emerald eyes vacant and watery. With a small shudder, the midnight-black cat collapsed into the ground.

"Sablefur! No!" Rushing forward, Koisplash brought her alabaster paw to the translucent cat's flank, frantically checking for any pulse. The vacancy of the usual throbbing beat unnerved the young warrior. The dead tom-cat had landed on his side, his many burn wounds facing the foggy ground. Shaken, the wide-eyed calico molly took a step back from the misty spirit, her thoughts whirring around her head. Shamrock green tendrils of light erratically flowed from the oil-black tom-cat and into the ground, creating an almost

root-like effect. Holding in a gasp, the sapphire-eyed feline stepped towards Sablefur again; this time she gently pushed his body so that both halves of his face could be revealed. What Koisplah expected was to see the grotesque lesions with plagued his blush-pink fur, and the bubbling sound of miniature flux bubbles popping, yet the image she was greeted by was far more shocking than any of the twisted reality had given the poor she-cat. Completely shrouding the wounds were thousands of honey-gold asters, each soaked in thick, syrupy-sweet currant liquid, along with tufts of golden fur and broken insect wings.

Awoken with an abrupt lurch, Koisplash woke again, covered in a mixture of her own urine and other bodily fluids. Dozens of images of the nightmare's traumas flashed in the dappled she-cat's scared orbs. Her eyes desperately searched the cave, spotting everything in its usual place. Heaving a relieved sigh, the lithe feline turned to face her fellow trapped cats and friends.

"Lynxpaw, I think StarClan sent me a vision..."

ix

Lasting Hibernation
word limit - 1500
points earned - 10

A sheet of desperation blanketed the inky granite cavern. The air was stale and musty, the suffocating worry crowded the cave. Drops of pure light seeped from small cracks in the stone wall, and from little punctures in bark from a sturdy tree that covered the entrance. Small crevices crammed with foul-smelling, wilted leaves and browning, syrupy berries dotted the far wall of the den. Alabaster bones messily littered the floor; chunks of rotting meat clung to the jagged remains. The dense, graphite-coloured stone walls were abrasively marked with shallow, violent grates, fuelled with desperation and fury. Seedy-looking felines with matted fur gathered along a rough redwood trunk, their flint claws blunt and unsheathed. Sharp merlot splinters were strewn around the cat's various sized paws, the pointed wooden edges creating potentially hazardous incidents. A melodic, woeful hymn spread throughout the porpoise-grey cave, followed by a low, submissive sigh.

Sitting stiffly beside a corner of shadows, a lithe, young she-cat with subdued cobalt eyes glanced at the sturdy barrier blanketing the small mouth of the cavern. Her ruffled marmalade, oil, and white fur were obscured with a thick layer of dust and grime. Beneath her paw's knotted fur lay raw, exposed paw-pads, bloodied and covered by thick crimson liquid. Putrid scents of sour urine radiated from the calico molly, an odorous reminder of a fitful nightmare. Methodical thumps sounded throughout her sensitive feline ears, the meticulous pump of blood running inside of her veins muting any other sound from the cavern. After every long moment, the

young warrior would get rid of the glaze that masked her eyes, looking at the gathering of cats in front of her, yet her azure eyes would eventually glaze over again. Breezy thoughts drifted through the cat's mind like flowers in a gentle zephyr, her focus directed at daydreams, rather than reality. With a parched mouth and exhausted muscles, the tri-colour she-cat snapped out of her trance one final time as a large crash echoed within the slate stone den.

Only a few fox-lengths away were a group of five cats, each facing a garnet redwood tree. Like a two-leg machine, each one would scrape desperately at the hard wood, pause, and then continue the painful cycle again; each shallow blow bringing down thousands of tiny needle-like splinters of bark. The cat closest to the calico - a fuzzy, muscular Scottish Fold, with deep, admiral-blue orbs, thick mahogany socks, and an assortment of freckles dotted along his cheeks and spine - brung his grey claws across a loose piece of bark, sending the coarse chunk spiralling towards the dusty floor. Hissing in confusion and fright, the dappled she-cat abruptly jumped onto all-fours, her pale eyes narrowed. "Watch where you're tearing down that blasted tree!" she yowled in anger. Several large wood chips had lodged themselves into her pink skin, allowing syrupy blood to ooze from the abrasions. With her short, white fur standing on end, the calico warriors growled softly, uttering curses underneath her breath.

The tension in the air was palpable, not one cat dared to move. All eyes were swiftly directed at the pair, waiting to see the scene unfold. Hours had gone by, and the warriors struggled to free themselves from the cave. The lack of basic feline needs, such as food and fresh water, had clouded each individual's mind in some way, constructing a strained environment. "Not my fault, Koispash." The folded-ear tom-cat grunted indifferently. A tom-cat for few words, the sapphire-eyed warrior didn't bother to say anything more. His past *sickness* had left him too weak to argue with a fiery personality. Whipping his head around to stare at the group behind him, he stared for a long, hard moment, and then continued to rip away at the hard bark. Soon, the others followed, resuming their laborious work. Koisplash scoffed, letting her attention wander around the cave, boredom seeped through her mind like the sun's stale light shining through the hole in the cave's granite roof.

A spark of realising hit Koisplash more forcefully than a fallen tree, literally. Tearing away at the bark would take too much time, something that the cats were out of. The young calico whimpered in agony as she dragged her fluffy, tender paws across the cavern's basalt floor, yet the idea of an escape masked the pain. The blue-eyed she-cat surveyed the gap as an almost impossible idea came to mind. From base to crown, the den was roughly two cat-lengths, excluding ears and tail. Outrageous plans formulated in front of her, each step becoming visual. Perhaps dehydration and starvation had finally caught up with Koisplash's body, but the semi-hallucinations allowed her to see the execution of the idea. "Hey! Grizzlyfang!" the tricolour molly piped, her sight not leaving the flint cavity. "Stop wasting your time hacking at that bloody redwood tree. I have a plan." Pricking his grey ears in interest, the senior warrior turned and padded towards the calculating she-cat.

It didn't take long for Grizzlyfang to understand the idea. Shouting orders at the other trapped AsterClan cats, the clowder of cats formed an intricate pyramid of loose stones and fragments of soft bark, raising the surface of the ground. With her dirty paws exposed and raw, there was little that the long-limbed calico could do, Koisplash could only watch as her classmates gathered rubble from the farthest corners of the cave. She kept her dark eyes glued on Lynxpaw, her light-amber medicine cat friend, as he gathered bark beside the former rogue she-cat, an elusive red tabby with burning golden eyes. Mistrust burned deep within the multi-coloured molly as she stared at the crimson cat. Cherryspark was clearly not trusted. After a long time of strenuous labour, the mound of pebbles and timber had grown up to Koisplash's black and marmalade shoulders.

"Alright, everyone, now that we've finished the pile, it's time to commence the second part of the escape." Koiplash mewed, her rough voice vibrating throughout the marbled granite cavern. Lifting her tiny paw, the nimble feline pointed at the sapphire-eyed Scottish Fold, and a solid singapura tom-cat by the name of Daisydust. "I can jump the highest, even with my paws in their current state. You two are, well, the biggest, so you'll be my base." Nodding slowly, the two large tom-cats stood side-by-side on the mound of pewter stones and redwood bark, their spines and muscle

forming a sturdy platform. With rich eyes gleaming in anticipation, Koisplash took two long strides behind, then ran up to the cats, swiftly leaping on their backs, and hurtling up to the small hole in the roof. While any healthy, uninjured cat could probably clear the distance, the dainty she-cat was to say, a little worse for wear. Her chest and forelegs daily made it out of the cavity, yet her hind legs dropped over the abyss. The molly let out a frightened yowl, her legs kicking wildly in the air as she desperately tried to find non-existent footing. With a large pant, the speckled feline managed to push herself upwards and onto the muddy ground. Flattening her chalk-white ears in relief, Koisplash looked up, scanning her surroundings.

Absolute carnage plagued the once-beautiful surroundings. Ancient redwood trees had given way, their mighty roots too strong for the quake. Shamrock leaves turned olive, then a willing rust as nutrition failed to be delivered. Patches of torn up hickory mud were scattered everywhere, along with pieces of crisp moss and the bodies of rotting cats. Ignoring the odd hungry sensation in her belly while looking at the mangled corpses, Koisplash searched for a vine amongst the destruction of her old home. After a tedious rummage through the remains of the old apprentice den, the young white-spotted calico unearthed a lengthy emerald vine lying amid the rubble. Gripping the vine in-between her ivory fangs, the lanky feline craftily knotted the tendril around a stump nearby the medicine-cat den, and sprinted towards the opening, throwing down the vine. One by one, each cat emerged, triumph radiating from their facial features. Koisplash felt a light touch on her cheek, smiling as she realised that Lynxpaw stood next to her. "I don't know if you heard, but good ol' Grizz is making us go to the mountains. Hopefully, AsterClan escaped there." the cream apprentice's breathy voice made the young she-cat's heart pound. "Thank you, by the way, for saving us. I know everyone thinks the same."

Koisplash was free at last, yet the destroyed camp and obliterated dens of the archaic forest dampened whatever jovial spirit she had. Almost a quarter of a moon spent agonising in the medicine cat den had drained whatever spirit the she-cat held. From the corner of her cobalt eyes, the calico spotted the elusive former rogue, a sleek red

tabby with hard, golden eyes, conversing with Daisydust and another feline, an apricot point molly by the name of Honeydapple. High-pitched feminine laughs erupted from the trio, the frequency vibrating through Koisplash's sensitive ears. Nausea crept up the nimble she-cat's throat, a strange feeling push through her belly. Something felt wrong. Grizzlyfang, who stood excluded from the group, stared into the fallen masses of trees, his sapphire eyes wide and folded ears pricked up; the muscular Scottish Fold had noticed something that no one else had. Abruptly, the freckled warrior turned and ran for the group, his face contorted in a frown.

"Get back in the cave." he slurred. Prickles of anxiety stung Koisplash, as sparks of worry entered her old mentor's eyes. What was going on? Had the might AsterClanner spotted danger? No cat dared question the senior warrior's announcement, yet they all exchanged glares of uncertainty and doubt. Forming a line, the clowder jumped back into the trapped cave, each with various stages of apprehension plastered on their faces. Blood thumped loudly in the lithe molly's ears as hesitation gripped her legs, anchoring her to the damp ground. Grizzlyfang was hurriedly grabbing shrubbery from nearby scrubs, and tossing them onto the green tendril leading into the cave's roof. The multi-coloured tom-cat glanced at Koisplash, snarling. "Get inside!" He quietly pleaded, but his former apprentice was frozen in her tracks. "Now!" the mahogany-socked tom-cat begged. Snapping out of her confusion, the she-cat let down the hole, ominous thoughts swirling in her mind as she pictured Grizzlyfang's foreshadowing stare.

Cloaked in the granite cave's darkness, five felines huddled together, their ears searching for hints of any kind. A bitter, acidic bile formed at the back of Koisplash's throat; her eyes shining with trepidation and dread. She placed her petite white paw on top of Lynpaw's oat-yellow ones, silently praying to her starry ancestors.

"Look who we have here. It's been a while, old friend." A scathing, mocking voice sounded from above the cave. "I believe it is time for you to face your fate." A slightly feminine chuckle followed the menacing statement, poison dripping from every breath. As the forbidding mirth faded out, deafening silence obscured the cave. Who was this cat? Koisplash knew nothing of what was unfolding.

"Fate is worthless, that I've proved. You can change anything." Grizzlyfang's deep voice sounded sorrowful, the tri-colour warrior could only imagine what he was truly feeling. "Where are the others! Tell me now! Your mind games are pitiful against me. No sacrifice can stop me from my pure vision." The unknown she-cat's voice raised an octave higher, rage wrapping around her words. Koisplash braced herself for the reveal, yet it never came. "My sweet Puddle, you trained me too well. I wish you luck on your holy purification. You will never find them" Grizzlyfang's opponent roared in anger, her screech piercing the hidden cat's eardrums. With two forceful impacts on the cavern's study roof, a large thump sounded, and a body fell to the ground once last time.

"May the shadows treat you well." Metallic blood swirled in the air, its distinctive odour hitting Koisplash like a powerful wave. Shocks ran through her spine; the realisation of death was too much for the young cat to handle. The Scottish Fold was slaughtered, and the sudden crack of ligament and bone confirmed it. "The endgame is coming, and there is nothing you, or any of your warriors can do to stop it." Spat the killer in a storm of cursing. Like a raindrop depending into a pond, the blue-eyes AsterClan feline choked slightly, her mind finally solving the puzzle.

The omen's prophecy had just begun...

X

The Light Brigade
word limit - unlimited
points earned - 9

There are few set rules in the universe, none of which can be broken. These laws dictate light, dark, day and night, and everything in between. Every decree moulds our life, keeping it healthy and secure. Most rules are unbroken indefinitely, yet at this day, one rule would be broken in the view of warriors.

Up marched five felines, their gazes filled with rage. Their path was not easy, and this final trek to the hidden valley was difficult to even to a healthy cat. A sandy-coloured tom-cat with great peridot eyes, lynx-like ears, and lengthy, knotted fur, trotted alongside two she-cats, his eyes clouded in thought. Beside him stood a regal, elegant garnet tabby with shining golden eyes, and an anticipating stare directed beyond. Lastly, covered in grime and dust, padded a small, lithe calico-and-white she-cat, equipped with nimble paws and a long, tendril tail. While this young molly was average, it was her eyes that let her be seen, that let her defy laws of the colours of flames. Shining in the calico's sapphire eyes were brilliant azure embers, their rich tones of blue vibrant among her inky black pupil. Her fiery lenses drank up her innermost fury, relishing every single drop of pure anger. The cobalt firestorm, a swirl of wrath reflecting in her hardened eyes, grew with every step she took.

The quintet travelled up the frigid mountains on the quest of finding the hidden valley where AsterClan hid. After days of being trapped in a cave, slowly dying of malnutrition, the clowder of cats had escaped at the dire cost of Grizzlyfang's life. An unknown she-cat had killed him in cold blood, yet the valiant Scottish Fold had

sacrificed his life for them. The sound of her mentor's final breath plagued Koisplash as she searched for the safe haven, the small whisper ringing out in her delicate feline ears. Looking around on the bleak horizon, the only thing each cat could spot were countless granite peaks obscured by low-hanging fog and snow. Aside from the monotonous thump of paws hitting the stone, and the light zephyr singing throughout the summits, a cool silence sat upon the group of travellers. With each bound the calico took nearing the valley, the greater her ferocity towards the nameless killer grew.

"I smell water. We are getting close." called a Singapura tom-cat, Daisydust, to the rest of the group. Twitching her blush-pink nose, Koisplash sniffed the air, sensing a brackish odour coming from the crags. The marmalade calico nodded her head in agreement of the statement, easily recognising the faint stench of river-water. Although the past events had been truly horrifying, the lithe molly couldn't help but feel an impression of anticipation as they drew closer to the obscured vale. Countless stories of how AsterClan stole the rumoured-to-be beautiful gorge from the enemy clan's clutches swarmed the speckled she-cat's mind, the tales painting the Battle of the Falls as a heroic mush of fighting buzzed through her conscious. The valley was only used in times of need, hence why the juvenile warrior had never ventured to it. The calculated guess that her clan would take refuge in there was the only idea that the whole group had agreed on. Sharing a suggesting stare with the sandy-coloured tom-cat, Lynpxpaw, Koisplash searched even harder for the vale.

If on cue, a slight aegean blue shimmer appeared behind a wall of alabaster clouds to the left of Koisplash's sight. The faintness of the shine made the young calico doubt that it was even there, yet after a few seconds of hard staring, the glimmer became more defined. "Hey, Daisydust, I think I found it." she mewed with a vocal tremor in her voice. Pointing her rust-ginger paw towards the fog, the flecked molly let out a near-inaudible growl. When she reached her clan, the she-cat envisioned to tell them about her mentor's death, which would (in her fantasy) lead towards the hunt for the killer. "Good job, Koisplash. The waterfall is usually hard to spot. We should head over there right away; our clan must know that we are alive."

Hurried blows of tiny cat-paws replaced any previous conversation as the clowder's steady saunter became a brisk jog. Pointing their noses towards the translucent gleam, the quintet grew a bubble of un-palpable keenness within them. Wafts of light wind grew fiercer with every bound, the gusts creating an eerie melodic howl that echoed throughout the sleet-covered peaks. The graphite-grey granite was quickly masked with a thick layer of muddy slush as the calico-and-white molly and her fellow travellers ventured deeper into cloaks of chalk-white fog. Koispalsh's usually precise feline vision could not see further than her own whiskers as the mist grew denser in comparison. Calling out to the light-cream tom-cat, the flecked she-cat yowled at the top of her lungs. "Daisydust! Are you sure we are going the right way?" Violent gales distorted the young warrior's breathy, feminine voice, yet miraculously, the singapura cat heard it.

"I'm sure!" Daisydust shouted back, his bronze-amber eyes staring at the calico. "We need to stick together, the wind and fog are dangerous!" Nodding in understanding, the lithe she-cat turned around, searching for the cats behind the wall of thick fog. How had the mist and wind picked up this fast? Koisplash was confounded on the mountain's weather patterns. Perhaps it was the high elevation that changed the meteorological conditions or StarClan's influence on the ever-changing climate. Beyond the blasting gust, three wind-stricken figures appeared in the dainty molly's line of sight. Trudging towards them, the azure-eyed calico and the sandy-coloured tom-cat regrouped, shouting directions among the clowder. "Koisplash, bite onto my tail," grunted Daisydust. "*Softly*." he hissed as she snapped her pearl-white fangs into his long tail. Murmuring a soft apology, Koisplash flattened her ears in embarrassment. "You three, do the same. We'll make a line so none of us gets lost. I know the way to the valley, we're not far."

Flinching slightly as Lynxpaw bit into her tail's delicate pink skin, the juvenile freckled she-cat trekked through the wind, following the senior warrior's every move. The lack of surprise radiating from Daisydust confirmed the marmalade calico's suspicions on the unpredictability of the alp's weather. Peacefulness overcame the feline as she embraced the trashing of the punitive wafts. Cobalt fire softened in Koisplash's eyes with every bound she took inside the

cloud. The AsterClan warrior was logical and rational, not one to let emotions cloud her judgement. While her beloved mentor *was* killed, she couldn't commit a crime of revenge in the dead Scottish Fold's name. In the molly's complex mind, she knew karma would eventually catch up with the unknown murderer. The thoughts of natural justice and karma soothed the nimble she-cat from her raging emotions of grief and desire for retribution.

After what seemed like hours of painful hiking on the pewter-grey summits, the harsh wind gradually mellowed out into the gentle breeze it once was, and the thick vapour began to dissipate. The steady incline of the path to the vale swelled, then dropped suddenly, and rapidly became uneven. Loose pebbles trundled down the slope every time a foot touched the coarse surface. As the group began to slow out of exhaustion, the once-compact smog thinned into a wispy haze, creating an ethereal expression to the snow-topped crags. Wet moisture crammed the fresh air as the brownish slush began evaporating under the thinning mist. The cats unconsciously and instinctively let go of each other's tails as the visibility was somewhat restored. Scanning the stone, the fiery she-cat noticed another abrupt ascent in the mountain's irregular gradient.

Trailing up the mountainside yet again, Daisydust's heartbeat thumped against his ribcage, letting the quartet know of his excitement. "We are almost there." chirped the old moggy with a gleeful smile. He quickened his pace despite the fatigue wearing at his bones, and the rest followed with equal enthusiasm. Once again, predictive images of a lush valley formed behind Koisplash's sapphire eyes. The calico-and-white cat overheard a hushed tickle on rushing water, sounding from somewhere near. Slowly, the trickle became a spurt, and then a boom of liquid spattering down below. Tiny droplets spat at the she-cat's cotton-white face, dampening her long fur. The thought of meeting Beepaw again came to Koisplash as the granite surface came to a point of no incline. A snow-clad peak stood boldly in front of the escapees, gushing ocean-blue fluid through a sight crevice at the peak. The water collapsed through tiny clouds, and into a large trench.

"We're here." the limber calico-and-white she-cat felt an electrifying

shiver crawl up her spine as the warrior uttered the two words. A chartreuse-eyed tom-cat stared at Koisplash, his eyes wider than a badger's jaws. "Pretty cool, huh." he grinned, his lynx-like ears pointed towards the navy sky. "You haven't seen nothing yet, Lynxpaw. Follow me." chortled Daisydust before the flecked feline could reply. One final time, the clowder travelled across the flat, ash-grey stone. The thunderous roar of the magnificent waterfall almost deafened the group as they neared the falling column of Aegean water. Koisplash's paws seemed like heavy trunks as she wanted over to the basin, her legs almost unwilling to move. In almost slow motion, the quintet arrived at the edge of the mountain, looking down into AsterClan's infamous mythical valley. With shining azure eyes widened, the black, white, and marmalade cat stared down at the beautiful sight that lay in front of her.

A circle of towering cliffs surrounded a lush, v-shaped valley. An aquamarine waterfall sliced through the morning mist, it's frigid water spraying from a crack in the highest pike of the mountain cluster. Rough kobicha tree trunks with brittle, peridot leaves protruded from the thick clouds of smog, creating small clusters of lavish jade clouds. The clean mountain air was stagnant, allowing a cold front to lay on the hard, rocky floor. Beneath a few loitering clouds, lay gleaming shamrock-green grass paved throughout the depths of the gorge, dew glistening on the chloroplast-ridden tufts. Amongst the clusters of grass were an assortment of fuschia, lemon and canary-yellow asters, spread out amongst the gorgeous field. Veins of impure salt weaved throughout the glossy dell walls. Emerging from the vapour collecting at the fall's bottom was a wide, deep steam, flowing throughout the surface and eventually assembling into a small, shallow lake at the southernmost point of the basin. Towards the densest constellation of bright flowers lay a large indent in the valley's wall, most presumably the camp.

Pure awe struck the group as they gazed into the vale below. "How will we travel down?" asked the regal red tabby, suddenly appearing beside the she-cat. "There is a path behind the falls. It leads to the ground. It's pretty slippery, though, be careful not to fall off." answered Daisydust. Without hesitation, the senior warrior turned and padded towards an inconspicuous indent on the side of the pike. Koisplash stood up, intending to trail her superior until

she got to the bottom of the vale, but was stopped but a scarlet paw pressing on her own chiffon-white one. "Go ahead." called a soft, girlish voice. "I need to ask Koisplash a question" Confusion flooded the lean calico's expression as she saw the three cats disappear into the tunnel behind the waterfall. A quick flash of regret passed through Cherryspark's piercing golden eyes as she watched the last of the trio leave them to talk by themselves. Following a few seconds of awkward silence, the red she-cat pricked her ear, trying to detect any nearby cats. Obviously not finding any noise from the departed trio, she tabby let out a small 'mrrow' of discomfort and leapt towards the tricolour cat.

Cherryspark's large, beefy paws easily knocked the lithe she-cat down to the ground. Placing her muscular legs and paws onto the calico's torso, the garnet tabby pinned her down, exposing her soft, alabaster-white belly. Screeching in surprise, Koisplash struggled against the larger warrior's grip. "What in StarClan's name are you doing?!" gasped the sapphire-eyed feline in disbelief. "We need to go down to the valley! Our clan are waiting for us." She continued to thrash under Cherryspark's ironclad grip, her inky pupils narrowed into terrified slits. "If we go down there, we'll be captured by the other clan. Your friends have probably been taken captive by now. You need to stop fighting back; I'm here to save you." The AsterClan she-cat's muscles involuntarily relaxed, yet the cobalt firestorms returned to her eyes. Raising her hackles in a threatening growl, Koisplash snapped back at the heavy molly on top of her. "Save me?! If this nonsense you're saying is true, then why?" The answer did not come. Instead, the currant-red feline let the multi colour she-cat escape from her clutch. "Come with me." She rasped at the smaller warrior. "If you don't, you *will* be hurt."

The duo strode stiffly to an overhang on the other side of the waterfall. Too many conclusions and assumptions preoccupied the long-haired she-cat's thoughts to have her observe her surroundings. The elusive tabby brought Koisplash before three cats, one of which held an air of somewhat importance. This cat sat between two pure onyx tom-cats, both with amber eyes. She was a beautiful chocolate-and-white tortoiseshell, with elegant features and an imperial expression painted on her delicate features. Hard-earned muscled rippled through her short fur, particularly prominent on

her shoulders and hind. Her sharp pear-green eyes raked the tri-colour calico from head to paw, searching for any weakness. "Thank you, Cherryspark. Your actions have been greatly appreciated." greeted the tortoiseshell in a slightly feminine, fruity voice. Her voice mimicked the texture of honey, and the small calico felt like a fly. With a shock realisation, Koisplash noticed the many similarities between Grizzlyfang's nameless killer and this new she-cat's voice. "Hello, young one, my name is-"

"You killed Grizzlyfang!" shouted Koisplash with a brittle undertone, cutting off the emerald-eyed molly. The young warrior was fuming, for she had finally met the killer only after hours of swearing that she would not take vengeance. "And so I do not deny it." the cat affirmed. "My name is Puddlestalk, and I owe you an explanation on what is happening." rolling her eyes, Koisplash snorted. "You sure do. What is going on?! Why did you kill my mentor?!"

Puddlestalk closed her eyes slowly and opened them again. "My dear, there are many things you do not know about your precious clan. Before I start my story, do tell me in your opinion, who are the two strongest - and dead- warriors of the clans." The question was rhetorical, and everyone from a newborn kit to an ageing elder knew the answer. "Myrtletuft and Azure-eye, the most powerful pair in the clans. Little do the general population know, the two formed a secret club as apprentices, where they trained at night to learn moves." Koisplash tilted her head, misunderstanding the point to this conversation and abduction. "At first, they invited an AsterClan medicine-cat to join the little guilt. Canarycry was his name. From then, Canarycry recruited me, and I recruited your *pathetic* mentor when he was an apprentice. The poor, insecure kitten was too oblivious to see the intentions of the group."

Was Puddlestalk trying to justify her cold-hearted murder? Koisplash continued to listen to the story, in hopes of finding out the motive, besides, she couldn't escape; she was outnumbered. "Over time, this club grew to form a midnight clan, and that soon evolved into an elite group of shadow warriors. We trained, formed alliances, and gossiped. Grizzlyfang, or Grizzlypaw at the time, was brought into the group when it first revealed its true self. The

members began to use their connections to gain power within the two clans. Seemingly randomised killings ensued over many moons. It wasn't until my sweetheart was so obscured by the darkness when I realised that we had been brainwashed, and this was all wrong." The chocolate-and-white tortoiseshell took a deep breath, then continued. "I managed to escape their grasp one night, but your mentor left a message for me. He killed your mother, Koisplash."

The lithe feline could not express surprise. She had come to terms with her late mother's gruesome death many moons ago. "So? What next. Why are you capturing my classmates?" Koisplash demanded. "I soon began my purification of the obscurities. I slaughtered every clanmate that had interacted with the union and then began executing your clan's poison. *I* started the fire that killed Brushnose, *I* poisoned your water, and *I* captured that striped apprentice." *No...* this was all too much to hear at once for the freckled warrior. "When that unfortunate earth-rumble occurred, I gathered your clan at the valley and murdered all the traitors. *I* will be the one to rebuild AsterClan." The new elevation of Beepaw sent shocks of horror coursing through Koisplash's veins. "But then why take me to you? Why spare me?" The blue-eyed feline shouted at Puddlestalk.

"Because Beepaw asked me to."

This could not be happening. The dots were finally connecting. The she-cat's brother was helping Puddlestalk. "But why?! You captured him!" In response, the royal-like molly flicked her feather tail, beckoning a hidden figure. Slowly hiking towards her was a familiar striped apprentice. With porpoise-grey eyes looking sheepish and ashamed, the tom-cat sat next to Puddlestalk. "Because I saw reason in her statements, sister." murmured Beepaw. "And you will too. I have been asked to give you an ultimatum. Our leader wishes to cleanse AsterClan, and erect it from the ashes. Our clan's population will be reduced, and we need the enlightened to control it." The calico could not bear looking into her littermate's pleading eyes, as all she could see was a traitor. A metallic tang entered Koisplash's lips as she realised what was coming. "My sister, I love you. I am doing this for you." The young warrior shook her head at Beepaw's statement, wishing that she could believe that it was not true. "Koisplash, Puddlestalk is giving you two options. You may be

executed with the defectors, or you will join us." Eyes widened, the splotched molly knew exactly how much she valued her precious life.

And she had no choice but to join them...

the end

facts

- The dead she-cat in chapter v is Koisplash and Beepaw's mother

- Koipaw's warrior name was a last second decision. She was originally to be called Koipounce

- AsterClan's story isn't over yet! The sequel to *The Chronicles of Koipaw* will be written for a new writing competition, perhaps Scriptorial season two

- Grizzlyfang has hypothyroidism and Lynxpaw has hyperthyroidism.

- The three StarClan cats from chapter ii will return in the sequel. If you haven't noticed, Myrtletuft and Azure-eyes have appeared multiple times throughout the novel

- Clues are scattered throughout the chapters that foreshadow the next chapters or the sequel and backstory

- Grizzlyfang looks nothing like his graphic from the graphic chapter. In reality, he has multicoloured freckles on his cheeks, tail and back, plus mahogany-brown socks. He is based off of a friend's roleplay character.

- There are a few LGBT cats in this story. Out of the main characters, Koisplash is asexual, Grizzlyfang and Lynxpaw are both bisexual.

- While captured, Beepaw developed feelings for Cherryspark despite the age. The crush was one sided, yet Cherry began to look at him like he was her daughter

- There was a minor mistake with the character Canarycry. At first, he was one of the cats trapped in the Medicine Cat den, but then in

the next chapter, the old medicine cat was named the same. The trapped cat was later re-named Daisydust

- Grizzlyfang was never supposed to die. It was a last minute decision and was partly written in because helloilovecats didn't want him to

- AsterClan wasn't supposed to be revealed as the Clan's name until the last chapter. Additionally, the second Clan's is never revealed. Hint: It starts with A

- Sablefur's prefix came from the novel *Saving Sable.* Sablefur was actually named Sabletuft until I had a mental blank and wrote the other name instead

- Grizzlyfang was almost named Grizzlynose

- Lynxpaw has deep romantic feeling for a character

- While there were not enough chapters to establish proper personalities, Koisplash's personality is similar to *Rosa Diaz* from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine,* and also sounds like her

- Grizzlyfang had a Russian thick accent, but it dissolved over time.

- After all of the events, Koisplash, Beepaw and Cherryspark develop PTSD. Koisplash' trauma will be touched on in the sequel

- The three StarClan cats were originally main characters. Batear/ Myrtletuft was originally Koisplash's uncle, while Azure-eyes was her mother. This was changed after the prompts didn't match my expectations

- Beepaw was almost called Ryepaw

- AsterClan was almost called CarmineClan

- Daisydust, Grizzlyfang and Puddlestalk are all names from other stories.

- Chapter x's title, *The Light Brigade*, is a direct reference to the popular poem, *Charge of the Light Brigade.* It even follows the same

rough plot.

- The opening paragraph of the final chapter is a small reference to the TV show, *Touch*.

- Most titles of chapters are references. *Believer* is a reference to the new *Imagine Dragons* song, *Black and Blue* is a reference to *Bruno Mars*' song, *Grenade*. *Starry, Starry Night* is a reference to *Vahn Gogh's* famous painting, *Lasting Hibernation* is a reference to Grizzlyfang's death, and *Shiver and Linger* is a reference to two shitty werewolf books I once read.

more added later

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I hope to see many of my readers again. Please do not hesitate to give constructive criticism! Thank you all for reading *The Chronicles of Koipaw*.

~SilverhawkWC